

IDEAS FAITH

It Happened to Me: I Grew Up as a Jehovah's Witness

Lizz Huerta / xoJane @xojanedotcom | Jan. 8, 2015

IDEAS *xoJane.com is where women go to be their unabashed selves, and where their unabashed selves are applauded*

I learned quickly that the kid who tells everyone they're going to die in a firestorm isn't terribly popular

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The first time he asked me to sit in his lap a wave of nausea and terror flooded my body. I knew it was wrong but everyone was waiting. He was sitting in an armchair at my aunt's house, our family gathered around.

"Ho ho ho!" The man boomed. My younger cousins shrieked in excitement. I grimaced. "Come, sit here." He beckoned to me. I had wanted this my entire life, to sit on Santa's lap, to regale him with my Christmas wishes but it felt horrible, sinful. I was twelve years old. I was celebrating Christmas for the first time.

Up until then, I had been raised as a devout Jehovah's Witness. I'd lived the early years of my life in blissful ignorance of the rest of the world. My father taught me how to read when I was 3 years old, using a children's illustrated bible. Jehovah was one of the first words I recognized. I was taught that I was special. We lived in a small world of meetings, going door to door, studying the JW literature. We tried to convert people who were not aware of Jehovah and his promise of everlasting life. I was taught to be wary of the world, to look at things with a critical eye, that Satan had his hands in everything.

My dad immigrated to the States from Mexico in the early 1960s. He had come from a small, rural village where everyone knew each other and then he'd been uprooted by my grandmother and brought to Southern California. He didn't speak the language, he didn't know anyone and was emotionally disoriented. A couple of Jehovah's Witness kids approached him, they spoke Spanish, they offered him immediate community. They told him if he joined their religion he'd have what almost no one else had, ever lasting life on earth when the end of the world came in 1977. Dad signed right up. He met my mom in Brooklyn when he went to study at the JW Capitol in Brooklyn, Bethel. They married in 1975, months shy of when the world was supposed to end. It didn't. They moved to California.

Our religion didn't seem to care about children except as future propagandists of the "truth." There was no Sunday School, no youth groups. There was no fun. Nothing to look forward to except the end of the world. We were expected to be tiny adults. Witnesses had no celebrations, no joy-filled occasions.

A few days before I started kindergarten my parents sat me down to have a serious conversation. They explained that even though I could be nice to the other kids at school,

I couldn't befriend them because they were worldly, they lived lives outside of Jehovah's approval. I had to make sure I didn't do anything Jehovah wouldn't like.

In kindergarten I was the weird kid on the playground talking about how the world was about to end. I learned quickly that the kid who tells everyone they're going to die in a firestorm isn't terribly popular.

Holidays were verboten for Witnesses, so my sisters and I found creative ways to endure them. During Halloween we would lock the doors, hide in closets and pretend that the trick-or-treaters were Nazis and that we were Anne Frank, just trying to stay alive.

Every year after Thanksgiving I went into a depression. The weeks leading up to Christmas were painful because I wanted Christmas. I wanted to a magical fat man to deliver gifts to me. I wanted something exciting to look forward to. I was ashamed of my desire. Candy canes were my forbidden fruit and when I got my hands on one I'd suck it into a dagger and poke myself in the mouth as penance for enjoying it.

Jehovah's Witnesses don't celebrate Christmas for various reasons that made little sense to my childhood mind. Christmas, according to the doctrine, was based on a pagan holiday. Early Christians took Saturnalia, a Roman celebration of the God Saturn, and turned it into Jesus' birthday.

All Jehovah's Witness kids were expected to be models of pre-Apocalyptic living, the kind of piety that would reserve us our spot in the "New Order," the promised utopia that all Witnesses were readying for. The New Order was green pastures; the lion lay with the lamb and it seemed everyone had a baby panda or koala bear. This exquisite promise of paradise was supposed to quell our desire to be attached to the worldly world.

Every December, I covered my depression with a self-righteous rage that made me feel holy. I would stare down the kids around me and think *Yeah, go ahead, you enjoy your little Santa and Christmas while you can because you're gonna die in a firestorm and I'm going to live forever.* I used to have elaborate fantasies that the apocalypse would come during recess. The firestorm would begin and all the kids who had celebrated Christmas would be running around, screaming their heads off. They'd see me, protected in a bubble of divine light and run up, begging to be let in. I would shake my head and say, *You should have listened to me.*

Every year there was a holiday assembly where the whole school would gather to sing Christmas Carols. I wasn't allowed to attend. I would be sent to the nurses office where I'd sit on my cot. I could hear the kid voices singing from across the hall. I would pray as I struggled not to sing along in my head. It was a battle. It went like this:

Rudolph the red nosed reindeer

(Dear Jehovah, thank you for eternal life)

Had a very shiny nose!

(Protect me, Jehovah, from their worldly, wordly ways)

And if you ever saw him

(No, Satan! I will. not. sing. along. Satan, nooo!)

You would even say it glows

LIKE A LIGHTBULB!

Oh, Jehovah, I'm so, so sorry.

I was twelve when my mom decided she was sick of waiting for the end of the world, tired of the dogma, and we left the religion. We were immediately ostracized by our friends in the religion because we'd left. I was relieved and terrified. I had lived my entire life as a Witness and I was suddenly expected to forget everything. No more end of the world.

Religion had occupied a huge part of my life and then it was gone, and there was nothing left to fill the void. But Christmas was coming.

Our first Christmas party was at a relative's house. It was what I had wanted my entire life, to be like everyone else. But the Jehovah's Witness beliefs were ingrained in me by then and belief isn't a switch you can flip. I couldn't express my confusion; I was scared if I told my family what I was feeling they would assume I wanted to return to being a Witness.

That Christmas I did what I had always wanted to do, I sat on Santa's lap. It felt like sitting on Satan's lap. My capacity for belief in magic and fantasy had dried up. Whispering my wants to Santa wasn't not something that appealed to me anymore. I did it quickly, with a nervous smile, wondering if Jehovah was watching. It took me years to stop wondering if Jehovah was watching.

These days, when my doorbell rings and I open it to find Jehovah's Witnesses at my door, I am always polite but firm when I tell them I'm not interested. If the Witness happen to have a child with them it takes a lot not to tell the parent *you have no idea what you're doing to your child*.

I still don't celebrate Christmas, I don't have any emotional attachment to the holiday. I still have to fight off the old blues of exclusion that come creeping back into my life. I'm not an outward grinch but I'm frustrated at how invasive Christmas is, how it permeates almost every aspect of our society. I grieve what could have been but then I remember the religion gave me a gift, it taught me to look at the world with a critical eye.

I start each day with meditation, then a practice of writing down what I am grateful for. Each day I am grateful that I don't live under Jehovah's judgmental eye, and that I don't have to worry about firestorms anymore.

Lizz Huerta is a writer living in Southern California. This [article](#) originally appeared on [xoJane.com](#).



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ENTERTAINMENT CELEBRITIES

Hecklers Shout 'We Believe the Women' at Bill Cosby Show

Charlotte Alter @charlottealter | 11:14 AM ET

The comedian urged calm and told security to "let them have their say"

About 30 protesters disrupted Bill Cosby's show in Ontario Friday night, chanting, "We believe the women," in reference to the multiple sexual assault allegations against the comedian.

Cosby had been onstage in Hamilton, Ontario for about five minutes when around 30 women rose from their seats and took off their coats to reveal white T-shirts that said "we believe the women." Some blew whistles and shouted at the comedian. Cosby urged security not to arrest the protesters, saying, "Stop, let them have their say," according to [The Hollywood Reporter](#).

Supporters of the comedian responded with shouts of "we believe the men" and "we love you Bill." The show continued after the demonstration and Cosby received a standing ovation from the remaining audience members.